

Interview

Ahalya Chari, Trustee, Krishnamurti Foundation of India talks to **Meera Srinivasan**, Principal Correspondent and Deputy City Editor, *The Hindu*.

You have been an educator for over six decades. Could you share with us how the journey began and what it was like?

I'm afraid it has been a long journey. I belong to a generation that was inspired by ideals that emphasized the importance of giving oneself up completely to the welfare of society. I started my journey into education in 1943, when I was offered the post of a teacher in a girls' school that had been founded in 1913 by Dr. Annie Besant in Benaras, as Varanasi was called then. Dr. Besant herself had a farsighted vision of education and created an atmosphere of learning that was warm and friendly and a way of life that explored the rich cultural heritage of India and the world. Later in 1928 she handed over the institutions to Krishnamurti.

During those years, the school was greatly influenced by the spirit of Shantiniketan. Rabindranath Tagore broke down walls, brought education into the lap of nature, awakened sensibilities and the richness of aesthetics in education.

Those were also the years of the national movement which was a reality to us, not a chapter in a textbook as it is today. Gandhiji's presence and leadership, the trial of the three INA heroes at the Red Fort as reported in the daily papers, the trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 were very much a part of our lives then. We also heard the great 'Tryst with Destiny' speech of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1947, rejoiced for a moment at the fact of independence but also suffered deeply the agony of partition. Those were very difficult times for the nation.

You worked later at the Central Institute of Education in Delhi. What was special about the institute then that makes students still remember those days fondly?

Yes, I joined the Central Institute of Education in 1951 as a student and later as a lecturer in 1953 because of a passion for learning more about the discipline of education. I had by then found out that teaching is something that I really loved to do. It became a vocation, a calling.

Anathnath Basu of Shantiniketan was then the Principal. I think what was special was that the founders had a broader canvas of education for the preparation of teachers, not one that stressed skills of teaching alone but one of a total development of the person as well. The curriculum was therefore rich and included, apart from the training of the intellect, a space for students to engage in a whole range of co-curricular activities as well and learn about the different roles a teacher is responsible for in a school. That way there grew a deep sense of bonding with the staff of the institute.

Another wonderful thing was the interaction we had with the Basic Experimental School next door. I took students with me and we taught the children there and we learnt a lot. The whole concept of Gandhiji's Basic Education was fascinating. I often wondered if a modified form of that could not have been the direction for India.

How were tutorials conducted at CIE? What do you think is the importance of tutorials in institutional life?

I'm glad you are asking this particular question because at CIE one was exposed to the value of tutorials. We gave lectures in our areas of specialization to about 60 or more students which, however, did not give us a sense of personal contact.

Nevertheless, a tutorial where three or four students meet you every week was of immense value. At one level there was a personal contact which helped them talk over life's problems. At another there was an opportunity to delve deeper into the subject of study or widen their horizons by looking at education in a global context. That is why, perhaps, students remember the institute fondly.

I think that even in our undergraduate colleges now, if the tutorial system was introduced, students would learn much more than through lectures alone. As there is a clamour for more admissions, classes grow bigger in size. So it is absolutely necessary not only for teachers' colleges but also for colleges in general to have a system by which you also interact with students in small groups. This, of course, would make it more expensive, but the fact is that good education costs good money.

What was the idea behind the setting up of the NCERT? As you were involved with it at the beginning, what was your experience of it then?

I remember the discussions we had with experts from the University of Columbia on a new, holistic, educational vision for the country by setting up a national apex body which would be entrusted with the responsibility for giving a direction to school education at all levels with resultant changes for the preparation of teachers. And all this was to take place on the ground of sound research. So many of us at the CIE with experts from the U.S. explored a road map for a new educational policy relevant to the then existing national priorities. At that time it was also considered that the CIE would be the nodal agency around which the new centre would grow.

It didn't actually happen that way. The NCERT came into being as a separate entity, an autonomous body of the Ministry of Education. The vision then was threefold, that NCERT be involved in research, teacher education and extension services.

The first thing we did was to envisage what the different departments would be. I'm glad that we set up a Department of Curriculum, Textbooks and Evaluation as that laid the foundation for future directions and I was happy to be a part of that. Initially, there were also Departments of Psychology and Psychometry, Adult Education, Field Services, Guidance and Counselling etc. Individual departments functioned out of hired buildings in different parts of the city. Joint meetings were usually held at the CIE.

As far as I recall, the heads of the various units and the first team that worked with them were highly dedicated, competent persons eager to blaze a new trail. Not that we had all the answers. In fact, we did not have the answers, but the spirit was right – one of learning, exploring,

observing, talking to each other with no boundaries. And, therefore, there was a very good ethos that prevailed.

In addressing its responsibility for teacher education, the NCERT set up four Regional Colleges of Education at Ajmer, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar and Mysore. They were to introduce an integrated programme of four-years after school for the preparation of teachers for vocational streams at school.

With hindsight I feel that, perhaps, the curriculum department should not have been dissolved in favour of subject departments, evaluation and so on. That is why I was very happy that the present focus of the NCERT has been on developing a National Curriculum Framework, drawing the best of minds in the country to the task which has resulted in a document, which is extraordinarily significant for India today. If we start with that manifesto, there is hope of a regeneration in education at different levels, because we go from the whole to the parts.

If you think the present teacher education process needs to undergo some changes, what are your suggestions?

Looking back, I think the strength of the Regional Colleges was that they catered to students from very middle class backgrounds, both rural and urban. They were all given a small scholarship. They had the best of professionals teaching them. The college too offered excellent facilities which are normally the privilege of only the elites in society. They lived on campus and were highly motivated. One certainly felt the emergence of a new society that broke through class, caste and religious barriers.

Today, the profession does not attract even those who are interested in teaching. Perhaps, our colleges of education, or at least most of them, do not offer the kind of atmosphere or facilities that, say, top engineering colleges or management institutes do. Of course, it costs money but are we willing to treat the profession of education as equivalent to or even more important than any other? Perhaps we need to review our own position on the economics of running first-rate colleges of education.

I think there is an urgent need to set up a few National Colleges of Education with a totally new perspective, in rural settings where nature abounds, where simple people live far away from the noise and bustle of society. Our rural children deserve the best of teachers and this may be one way of ensuring that the youth there do not migrate to cities in search of work, living in dehumanized conditions.

We give so much importance to the start up of world-class institutes for the IITs, IIMs and even for medicine. Is it not time that we woke up to the fact that colleges of education too have to be given the same importance if not more, if the nation is interested in raising the quality of education?

The question may arise as to how best we might utilize the existing campuses of the four Regional Colleges of Education. I understand there are some courses in science education and for the training of teachers in elementary education continuing there. I wonder if some long-term

or short-term diploma courses in special areas could also be added, perhaps in collaboration with foreign universities. My anxiety is that we need to lay the foundation for a variety of rich programmes to attract committed young people to the profession.

What is unique about Krishnamurti's vision of education that made you move away from work at the national level to undertake a different journey? What has been the nature of this exploration?

Why did I move away from all this? First, because I was uneasy with the radical changes in the outlook on education in general, evident by the new vocabulary of educational discourse. Children suddenly became *raw materials*. Teaching was a *transaction* in class and learning was dissected into *behavioural outcomes*. We asked for *targets* and so on.

In a conversation I had with noted thinker Ivan Illich, who had come to Varanasi to meet Krishnamurti, I asked him what he was working on then? 'On words; how they have changed in meaning over time. If you ask a housewife today "Are you *working*"? she is likely to say, "No, I am not. I'm a mere housewife." That *work* equals *wages* comes from the Industrial Revolution.'

Then again I had been listening to Krishnamurti's talks to the public, to children and teachers at our schools for many years right from 1949 when I first met him. And yet these two streams – the glimmer of an inner response to the truth of his statements and my involvement in the work outside – seemed to have very little connection. Vast spaces needed to be looked into – both in my understanding of life and education.

In a conversation with Krishnaji in Delhi about that time I expressed this discontent. He listened to me intently, as only he could, and invited me to join the Foundation's work if I really saw the limitations of what I was doing. I was taken aback for a moment and then asked what I could do if I were to go back to Rajghat at Varanasi. He said very simply, 'Set the Ganga on fire.' That was the mandate I got from my teacher and it set me on fire. I put in my papers to the NCERT and proceeded to Varanasi, not knowing what I would do.

The Rajghat Educational Centre is located in Varanasi on about three hundred acres of land on the banks of the Ganges at the spot where the river meets the Varuna. You get a magnificent view of the river from the campus. It was the site of ancient Kashi. Legend also has it that the Buddha walked through this land on his way from Bodhgaya to Sarnath to give his first sermon. Krishnaji often talked of the sacredness of the soil.

There we have a residential, coeducational school, a women's college with a hostel and a large rural centre comprising a farm, a dairy, a hospital and a rural school for the poor. Several people dedicated to Krishnaji's teachings have worked there from time to time.

My own journey there was of a totally different nature. It demanded an awareness of what was happening within you, a transparency and an honesty in relationship with people, and a sense of responsibility for the whole. Krishnaji was to spend four or five weeks every year at Rajghat. The magic of his presence brought to us a sense of the abundance and richness of life. An austerity, a complete honesty in speech or gesture and a love for total anonymity marked his presence. It was a time for celebration with trees and flowers in bloom, with the arrival of birds,

monkeys and peacocks, with the river rejoicing as it flowed by – but he was no celebrity. He walked all over the land. He spoke easily and warmly with people – teachers, students as also monks, sanyasis and simple men and women who came to him with their sorrow.

The way he related to the cook or the gardener, the fisherman or the boatman, the natural way he helped the shy village woman carrying a load on her head, his long brisk walks, his visits to the huts of weavers where a whole family worked on the loom, were lessons for us to learn from. With the poor, language was no barrier for compassion communicated easily. They too had a reverence for the holy that only the so-called ‘uneducated’ of this land have. At a public talk he was to say: ‘The miracle of this land is that the poor smile. Nowhere in the world does this happen.’

What was special about his education? He was a master-teacher when he spoke to the students simply, directly, never giving prescriptions, always asking them to probe, to enquire, to use their brains. He spoke to them about freedom and discipline, beauty and sensitivity and so on, and went into their own little questions with immense patience.

With the teachers his dialogues were forthright, demanding the highest best of their own lives, of their work and their relationship with children. That has created in our schools an atmosphere of responsibility and affection.

Once a friend and I asked Krishnaji what were his objectives of education. He thought for a while and said: ‘A global mind, concern for man and nature and a profound, religious spirit.’ So we held many dialogues with teachers about what these pointed to for our work.

At one level the cultivation of a global mind would mean helping teachers and students break barriers in the mind that create racial, national, religious, linguistic boundaries between people. Learning to look at prejudices, preconceived notions and walls that separate people is essential. That is not a difficult task for a liberal-minded teacher who has himself seen through these as limitations.

In one dialogue Krishnaji himself asked teachers: ‘What is history? Is it the story of kings and battles or do you see it as the story of mankind, which is really the story of yourself?’ A leap in our usual patterns of thinking, no doubt, but something worth reflecting upon.

Or he was to ask: ‘When you teach maths is it not the seeing of order?’ While stressing academic excellence one saw that he wanted the educator to delve into the essence of each discipline and convey that flavour through questioning, enquiry and observation as modes of learning.

At a deeper level, he urged us to see that human consciousness is one, not individual. That was a real challenge.

Concern for man and nature flows naturally when feelings are addressed. His talks to children were simple and direct. He told them once, ‘Many of us have very little feeling about anything. Do you know what it is to feel, to care, to look? To watch the river, to look at the moon, to listen

to the movement of trees? ...Have you ever taken in your hand a bird that is wounded? ...All this makes one tremendously sensitive.'

In our schools we have often discussed how to make children care – about the way they dress, their taste, their sense of beauty in the way they talk or conduct themselves. It is easy to prescribe rules but changes in attitude and behaviour take place only when there is an open sharing between teacher and students that may bring in new insights. Looking, listening and observation in silence therefore are as important as learning from books. The atmosphere also has to be non-authoritarian. Working together collectively both teachers among themselves and with pupils assumes priority.

To Krishnamurti, education was always a deeply religious activity. How does one communicate that profound religious spirit he spoke of? First of all can we deny to ourselves that religion is not doctrine, dogma, rituals and beliefs and share with students what it means to be free of this burden? Krishnaji also talked to students about the difference between the scientific mind and the religious spirit. The scientific mind is factual, it is precise, it discovers the principles that govern the world outside. The religious enquiry is of the within, the process of understanding inner movements. Both have to go together.

The education of the educator is, therefore, one he emphasized most. Can she understand that in discovering the movements of the world within, she starts at the same level as the student? Both have to uncover their own backgrounds, their own conditioning and understand thoughts and feelings as they arise. The movement of self-knowing is the ground of the religious spirit.

The challenge he set for educators is to be alive to both streams and make the whole of life into a movement of learning.

Working with Krishnaji for over a decade was a joyous journey of new discoveries for me, no doubt, but there has also been a deep sadness about one's own limitations.

The Krishnamurti schools continue to emphasize the importance of a non-competitive ethos in schools. Do you think it is possible and feasible to make students fit into our very aggressive society?

What does it really mean to advocate an educational system that helps students fit into our very aggressive society? Let us go into this first.

Look at what is happening to our young men and women who have perforce to enter the rat race to be at the top of the ladder. Is there any happiness in their lives? Now and then one hears of their having to attend 'stress management' courses. And what is a happy society? Is it one which worships power, success, money alone? Is it one where the media makes use of innocent children to promote consumer goods? Is there any joy possible for a child if she was part of an 'elimination round' when she faces celebrities and the public in competitions which we encourage, in such personal areas of expression as music, painting, dance, drama, and so on? Should we not examine the more important question as to whether the motivation to learn and strive for excellence is born out of nourishing a spirit of comparison which is inherent in

competition? Is goodness born out of competition and hurt or out of intelligence and compassion?